



Linking parents to reading instruction

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When young children learn to read, their chances for later school success improve. Family is the root of a child's early literacy experiences. Comprehensive family literacy is one approach that values and supports the impact parents have on a child's early years and links that impact to the delivery of systematic reading instruction. Much has been written about the importance of reading to a child's overall academic achievement. According to Moats (1999),

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Research now shows that a child who doesn't learn the reading basics early is unlikely to learn them at all. Any child who doesn't learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life. (p. 5)

A child's earliest experiences with reading are crucial; they lay the groundwork for development along a continuum of abilities that expedite future success. In their joint position statement, the International Reading Association and the U.S. National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) stressed the importance of establishing this early foundation.

Learning to read and write is critical to a child's success in school and later in life. One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing. Although reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout the life span, the early childhood years—from birth through age eight—are the most important period for literacy development.

While formal education has a tremendous impact on a child's development, research consistently points to parents as the originating source of literacy experiences for their children. According to Shonkoff and Phillips (2000),

A vast store of research...has confirmed that what young children learn, how they react to the events and people around them, and what they expect from themselves and others are deeply affected by their relationships with parents, the behavior of parents and the environment of the homes in which they live. Even when young children spend most of their waking hours in child care, parents remain the most influential adults in their lives. (p. 226)

Gopnik (2000) stated that "we have undeniable evidence that babies and those who care for them together seem to be a beautifully designed system for human learning" (p. 6). Although research supports this intrinsic system of learning between parent and child, we must also recognize that learning, specifically reading development, does not happen by accident. Studies continually link parents' education with the academic achievement of their children. One study of kindergartners by Denton and Germino-Hausken (2000) showed that as a mother's education increases, so do the reading and math scores of her child. Another study by Britto and Brooks-Gunn (2001) specifically correlated the education level of a mother to her child's vocabulary skills. According to Primavera (2000), parent-child literacy activities in the home, such as helping children recognize letters, reading to

children, or assisting children with reading and writing assignments, improve children's language skills and heighten their interest in books.

Systematic Reading Instruction

Reading is a complex skill that requires a systematic approach to instruction. When that approach is linked to a child's home environment and interactions with parents or intimate caregivers, the likelihood for success is enhanced. In the United States, comprehensive family literacy services, as defined by federal legislation, are one approach that intentionally structures multigenerational reading instruction across four interdependent components: children's education, parenting education (Parent Time), interactive literacy activities between parents and children (Parent and Child Together Time), and adult education.

In family literacy programs, the children's education component is designed to promote young children's growth and development and also engage parents in their child's educational process by fostering meaningful involvement. Parent Time offers parents a forum to learn specific strategies to support their children's literacy development, guided by both the adult educator and their children's teachers. The content for Parent Time draws directly from the child's curriculum and current reading ability. During Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time, parents and children come together to practice reading and other literacy skills under the supervision of instructors who honor parents' significant roles in their children's literacy development. Parents try out new strategies that they can then transfer home.

The significance of the adult education component as it pertains to children's literacy development is easy to overlook. The obvious connection is that as parents increase their education, they are more likely to provide an economically stable home environment. The 2000 unemployment rate for adults 25 years old and over who had not completed high school was 6.4%, compared with 3.5% for those with four years of high school and 1.7% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b). As household income and parental level of education increase,

so too does parental involvement in a child's school experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a).

A subtler link occurs as parents change their perspective on literacy, recognizing and capitalizing on their role as their child's first and most important teacher. As parents' reading and basic skills increase, they are better equipped to support their child's education. In turn, as they increase their understanding of how their child learns, they often gain new understanding about how they themselves learn. This can be a powerful motivator for adults to continue working toward their own educational goals while becoming more involved in their child's literacy development.

In a comprehensive approach, the four components of children's education, Parent Time, PACT Time, and adult education are integrated to create a system of influence that has an impact on children, adults, and the learning relationship between them. The following is an example of how this system can work to provide intentional experiences that build on systematic reading instruction.

During story hour, a kindergartner enjoys listening to her teacher read out loud to the class, pointing out words that "sound the same," which the teacher calls rhyming words. The kindergartner feels confident when the teacher calls her to the front of the room to pick out rhyming words from the story.

In Parent Time, the kindergartner's father learns that repeating and copying down rhyming words that he points out for his child can enhance her "ear for language" and her "eye for words." The father learns that these are important steps in building phonological, phonemic, and eventually phonic development. He jokes that it's a lot easier to remember "eyes" and "ears" than all those "P" words!

When the kindergartner and her father are united in PACT Time, she proudly shows him the chart and the rhyming words she correctly identified during story hour. Later, as the teacher reads a familiar rhyming book out loud to the whole group, the father listens to the teacher pause to let the children complete the sentences. The father notices how the children are able to identify many of the rhyming words on their own.

Following PACT Time, the father practices word analysis in his adult education class, identifying word families and creating real words by attaching different consonants to the word families. Next, everyone in the class reads an article and highlights the word patterns they are working on. The father realizes how closely related his own reading work is to that of his daughter.

That night, father and daughter sit down to read a new rhyming book together. The father points to the words as he reads them out loud so that his daughter can follow along. When he comes to the end of a sentence, he pauses and asks his daughter what she thinks the rhyming word is. She squeals with delight when her father tells her she's exactly right.

Imagine the impact of this scenario and others like it, delivered with intensity and duration, over the course of a program year. Using the integrated approach of comprehensive family literacy services helps contextualize learning for both parent and child, making systematic reading instruction that much more meaningful. When adults begin to understand their ability to positively influence their children's development, they recognize the importance of their own skill development.... Or is it the other way around?

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